

QUICKNOTES

Neighborhood Planning

Neighborhood plans present recommendations for a discrete, contiguous subarea of a city. Most neighborhood planning areas contain housing as well as commercial, institutional, and recreational uses that serve the local area. Some neighborhood plans cover a wide range of topics relevant to the plan area, while others focus more narrowly on topics of special opportunity or urgency.

Background

Planners have long viewed strong neighborhoods as the fundamental building blocks of healthy cities. Strong neighborhoods are not static. They are dynamic places where residents, institutions, and physical features all change over time. Strong neighborhoods are places where heritage and tradition are valued, and places where both new and long-term residents feel a collective sense of ownership and responsibility.

Neighborhood planning has its roots in the early 20th century concept of the neighborhood unit, popularized by Clarence Perry of the Regional Plan Association in 1929. In Perry's model the neighborhood unit was a predominantly residential district or section of a city centered on neighborhood institutions and ringed by neighborhood-serving shops and services. While few real-world neighborhoods match Perry's unit to a T, his idea influenced a wide range of neighborhood-scale planning initiatives in older cities across the United States in the second half of the 20th century, and has continued to provide inspiration for neighborhood-scale planning and development that aims to replicate traditional neighborhood design.

In many cases neighborhood plans function as extensions of an adopted local comprehensive plan. They refine the community's vision for a subarea of the jurisdiction and provide more specific goals, policies, and implementation guidance. However, relatively few cities have a systematic neighborhood planning program that divides the entire geographic extent of the jurisdiction into neighborhood planning areas. Rather, most cities intermittently engage in neighborhood planning when particular areas are experiencing or anticipating dramatic changes. Furthermore, many neighborhood planning initiatives are self-organized by residents and other neighborhood stakeholders, and the resulting plans may or may not have a formal relationship with the local comprehensive plan.

Defining the Neighborhood

While the term "neighborhood" is familiar to most people, it often takes on different meanings based on context. Planners and local officials may think of neighborhoods primarily as political subdivisions that make it easier to deliver services or analyze small-scale social or economic trends. And these neighborhoods may have relatively arbitrary boundaries (e.g., to ensure that all neighborhoods have roughly the same population), or their boundaries may be more "organic" (e.g., based on changes in land-use patterns, the character of the built environment, or demographic characteristics of residents).

In many cities, residents may have different ideas from local officials and from each other about what defines a neighborhood. They may think of their neighborhood primarily in terms of the spaces and institutions they visit or value the most. Alternately, they may be influenced by real-estate marketing or perceptions about cultural differences. Consequently, it's not uncommon for residents of the same block or even the same building to see different boundaries for their neighborhood.

For a neighborhood planning effort to be successful, all participants must first agree on neighborhood boundaries. Often the best ways to determine appropriate boundaries is to have residents as well as representatives from local government and social service providers draw their own boundaries on the same map. This can help identify areas of common, if not universal, agreement.

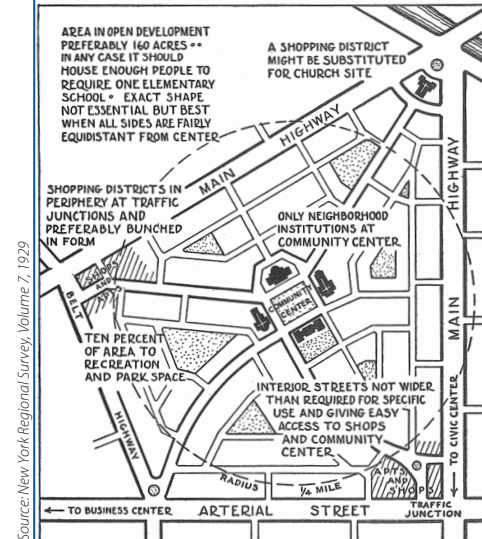


Diagram of Clarence Perry's
neighborhood unit.



American Planning Association

Making Great Communities Happen

Defining the Scope

If the neighborhood plan is an extension of the local comprehensive plan, it makes sense to address all of the major functional elements or pertinent themes of the comprehensive plan in the neighborhood plan. In other cases, it may be beneficial to narrow the scope of the plan to a few topics or themes of special relevance or importance to the planning area.

The benefit of a more limited scope is that it can be easier to build support for action around a small set of pressing issues than it can be for a broad set of topics with varying levels of perceived neighborhood-level impacts. Another advantage of limiting the scope of the plan is that it generally makes it easier to go into greater depth on issues of top concern for residents and other stakeholders.

In addition to being more limited in geographic extent than the local comprehensive plan, neighborhood plans also typically have a shorter time horizon. While 20 to 30 years is common for a comprehensive plan, the implementation time frame for neighborhood plans is often between five and 10 years.

Setting Goals and Objectives

In the context of neighborhood planning, goals are general statements about desirable future conditions in the neighborhood, and objectives are measurable outcomes in furtherance of these goals. Often, planners, local officials, or neighborhood leaders use surveys and a combination of online and in-person visioning and goal-setting exercises to help identify potential goals for the planning area. Then, one or more stakeholder working groups may take on the task of refining these goals and establishing objectives. The most successful goals and objectives tend to be those with the broadest base of neighborhood support and the firmest grounding in economic reality.

Detailing Policies and Actions

Beyond goals and objectives, effective neighborhood plans typically include both specific policy statements and action steps. Policies are statements of intent with enough specificity to guide decision making, and actions are directives about capital investments, regulations, programs, or procedures intended to implement each policy. While goals and objectives may remain somewhat abstract, policy statements must suggest a specific course of action, and action steps should make it clear who will do what by when.

Conclusions

The limited geographic extent of a neighborhood plan has both advantages and disadvantages. The narrower focus of neighborhood planning and strong connections that many stakeholders feel to their neighborhoods can lead to a loss of objectivity in the neighborhood planning process. In these cases, neighborhood plans may make it difficult for cities to prioritize scarce resources. With that said, residents, business owners, and institutions may identify more with specific neighborhoods than with the city as a whole. For this reason, it can be easier to engage these stakeholders around planning initiatives that have obvious implications for their homes, businesses, and shared public spaces. Furthermore, neighborhood plans offer opportunities to be more specific about goals, objectives, policies, and actions to guide growth or change within a small area over a relatively short time period.

PAS QuickNotes (ISSN 2169-1940) is a publication of the American Planning Association's Planning Advisory Service (PAS). © 2016 by the American Planning Association. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing. Visit PAS online at planning.org/pas to find out how PAS can work for you. American Planning Association staff: James M. Drinan, ID, Executive Director; David Rouse, FAICP, Managing Director of Research and Advisory Services; David Morley, AICP, and Anna Read, AICP, QuickNotes Editors; Julie Von Bergen, Senior Editor; Susan Deegan, Senior Graphic Designer

FURTHER READING

1. Published by the American Planning Association

Gregory, Michelle. 1998. "Anatomy of a Neighborhood Plan: An Analysis of Current Practice." In *Modernizing State Planning Statutes*, Vol. 2. PAS Report No. 480/481. Chicago: American Planning Association. Available at planning.org/pas/reports/archive.htm.

Jones, Bernie. 1990. *Neighborhood Planning: A Guide for Citizens and Planners*. Chicago: American Planning Association. Available for purchase at planning.org/publications/book/9026753.

2. Other Resources

Colombo, Louis, and Ken Balizer. 2005. "Neighborhood Planning." Available at neighborhoodplanning.org.

Myerson, Deborah. 2004. *Involving the Community in Neighborhood Planning*. ULI Community Catalyst Report No. 1. Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute. Available at tinyurl.com/jug84mw.